Existential Commentary
(This forum will be a regular feature of our journal
devoted to invited student essays on topics we judge to
be of contemporary interest. The style will be more
informal and is our version of an “op ed.”)

Perspectives on The Meaning of Life
Corbin S. Fowler

As regards an understanding of the question of the
meaning of life, and any metaphysical question which
depends on it, one should wrestle with and
comprehended the question of what it is to “know thyself,”
and the reality in which “they” are located. To this matter,
I make three propositions:
1. We are subjective beings.
2. We would be wisest to recognize the limits of such
   a mode of access to the world.
3. We are symbiotically a part of a fundamentally
   shared reality -- be it objective or merely inter-
   subjectve.
It is from these three propositions that I derive my
perspective on the question of “the meaning of life.” We are
subjectively oriented beings who occupy a shared space,
on a tiny little speck of dust in the cosmic sky called
“planet Earth.” In fact, this symbiosis can be extended
universally, in which case we are but infinitesimally small
beings interacting with one another in but a tiny corner of
the cosmos. Despite our atomistic relationship to this
objective whole, we still experience things subjectively –
and, in the sense that I am discussing it here, meaning –
or meaningfulness – is an experience. If we apply this
perspective to the question of the meaning of life,
meaningfulness seems to be
Janua Sophia

a.) something experienced only subjectively,
b.) something that some of us, in varying degrees of certainty, believe to have inherent worth,
c.) a phenomenon that is shared in common with others.

Imagine that by meaning we are solely talking in regards to pleasure versus displeasure. Something is thus meaningful to the degree that it is pleasurable and unmeaningful to the degree that it is displeasurable. When a person listens to a band and absolutely loves the music that they are experiencing, this is incredibly pleasurable – and thus meaningful. Some people, in reaction to such an experience, may even come to be certain that the experience itself is inherently pleasurable, especially if there are many others who share the same experience and feel the same way. If the experience is inherently pleasurable, it is pleasurable no matter what anyone believes, or perhaps because it somehow is part of God’s Plan. In other words, the experience is about objective reality. The reality, according to the propositions listed above, is that the person experiences the music in the first-person: “I” loved their music; “I” think they’re great; “I” can’t stop listening to that band, etc. Neither the verbal expression, nor the thought, happens in any other mode than this first-person “I” thinking consciousness. If we come to believe that our experience was so incredibly pleasurable that it is meaningful in itself, such a belief may be perfectly benign, but what is our basis – cognitively – for supposing it to be factually true?

In reality, it seems there is none. To be objective means to be one of either of the two following senses: something
Existential Commentary

is objectively true if-and-only-if a.) it is made so by the Divine or b.) it is true regardless of what any person believes. However, what could possibly be our mode of access to such an objective reality, being that we neither experience the Divine nor anything beyond the limits of our subjectively oriented consciousness? Some mystics or religious persons may disagree here. They may assert that we in fact do (or at least can) have direct experience and communion with the Divine, or with Higher reality (objective reality) – but these claims remain problematic, at best, or from a third person, empirical point of view. Our only available route of possible access would be to demonstrate some contradiction in proposing that a given thing, or experience X is meaningless. In other words, this would show that meaning is conceptually inseparable from X. However, do we discover any such contradiction in, for example, proposing that listening to Pink Floyd is inherently pleasurable? A short amount of thinking here quickly reveals that the answer is: clearly not. There are people who do not find listening to Pink Floyd pleasurable, much less inherently pleasurable. Nor do we find any contradiction in proposing the opposite: that listening to Pink Floyd is not pleasurable. There are many fans of their music. Neither proposition yields any sort of logical contradiction, thus we are none the wiser as to whether or not a thing or experience X is objectively meaningful or not. For all we know, the very concept of “inherent meaning”—apart from someone’s experience of it—is a cognitively nonsensical thing.

On the flip side of things, however, we have not shown that there is no inherent or objective meaning in the sense
of created according to divine purpose. Our problem here is analogous to having a stance on the issue of God(ess)(s): believer, atheist, or agnostic? I conclude that the most rationally humble answer here is the following. So long as we are aware of our cognitive limitation as subjectively oriented beings, we can be justified in believing, disbelieving, and remaining neutral on the question of what is inherently worthwhile.

If we are to believe, however, that things are of inherent worth or significance, I suggest that a more humble and kind-spirited way of approaching such a belief is to ground it inter-subjectively, rather than objectively. Inter-subjectivity has an advantage here because it is a cognitive concept: we are only describing the world and making observations when we notice that other people sometimes share the same experiences and values as we do. We may think nothing of this, of course, but we may also take it as evidence (not proof) for an objective reality: a shared experience of something inherently worthwhile or significant. Indeed, a common meaning of the objectivity of some belief or experience is that it is inter-subjectively confirmed. However, when this perspective forgets and loses focus of the inter-subjective entirely, it can become entangled with arrogance and elitism. This can carry with it an attitude and essence of contrariness – of conflict. In pragmatic terms, we can say that “By their fruits, you will know them.” Strong and firm convictions about the objective or inherent meaning of things have, on the grander scale of things, caused great conflict, pain, and suffering worldwide. The very idea and point of inter-subjectivity is that it is shared. Conflict and opposition are
forces to the opposite effect. So, if we are to believe in inherent worthiness or significance, we are wiser to do so while acknowledging our cognitive limitations. We are wiser to focus on the component of such an experience that allows us to share it with one another, and not on delusions of how it sets us apart from and above others.

In any event, the question remains: what – if anything – makes my life worth living? This question can only be answered by each person -- by a reflection into his or her own being in the world. I can only offer my perspective of what – for the most part – has worked for me. I believe that we are beings of a shared reality, and we occupy a shared reality in which we are all better off regarding one another peacefully and compassionately. Striving to act peacefully and compassionately are the cornerstones of my ethic. Going about life this way fills everything I do and everything I experience with a sense of purpose even when this means doing unpleasant things. A pleasant experience is a blessing and a gift, and an unpleasant experience may be a chance to learn or improve who I am. I think it is possible to fill the heart with compassion and peacefulness until it flows like strength throughout the body, a reservoir of positivity and strength so that one comes through any experience wiser and more appreciative than one was before.

Living my life like this, I find meaning in places I never found it before, and even more meaning in the things which have always been dear to me. As for whether or not any of what I value is inherently worthwhile, I remain confidently agnostic.